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Regional

MOOCs are not the promised technological fix

In the last few years many have voiced highly spirited claims that a new formula of education in the form of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) was going to revolutionize higher education. The claim was that ample access to new technologies would make possible for anybody to obtain a quality college education for free through the Internet. A lot of individuals and institutions became very excited about this possibility and the conversation about it ranged from editorial articles in the media to extremely optimistic assertions by people associated with politics, education, government and industry.

One aspect of MOOCs from the beginning that gave respectability to this initiative was their relationship with big-time universities such as Stanford, University of California at Berkeley, The University of Texas at Austin, Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Further, many of these initiatives gained the financial support of big-time organizations, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the National Science Foundation and the American Council on Education.

Due to their auspicious beginnings, numerous opinion makers from columnists in The New York Times to other outlets heralded this new type of distance education as “the next big thing.” And many top educational institutions formed entrepreneurial initiatives to advance this new approach under the promise that it was going to democratize access to higher education, making it more accessible not only to the majority of the population but also to the less privileged ones, those with fewer recourses or living in more rural areas.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

As I have expressed in this column in the past, these promises were not that new. New technologies have been hyped as “cure-alls” for years. Similar experiments were tried with correspondence courses in the 19th century, radio in the 1930s and television in the 1950s. Not only that, but from the correspondence courses of more than a century ago to the MOOCs of today, there is the fact that while large numbers of people sign up for these courses, only a very few (less than five percent) ended up finishing them. And most of those individuals were mature adults of an upper economic status who already had some postsecondary education.

Now a new study has confirmed those suspicions.

In an article recently published in the prestigious peer-reviewed journal “Science,” John D. Hansen and Justin Reich, from Harvard University, tested the claims that MOOCs were democratizing higher education. And the results of their study were a clear-cut indication that such is not the case.

They studied the registration and completion patterns of 68 courses offered by Harvard and MIT. These two institutions collaborate in creating a MOOC initiative under the name of edX. These researchers found that the majority of registrants in MOOCs already had a college or graduate degree. Further, this research – conducted among more than 160,000 registrants from the United States – showed

that the average student in the 68 courses offered for free by Harvard and MIT under this umbrella resided in neighborhoods where the median household income was almost \$70,000, which is about \$12,000 above the neighborhood national average. When that comparison was made among students whose age was between 13 and 17 years old, the income difference was even bigger – more than \$23,000 above the average American household. Not only that, but the vast majority of participants lived in urban areas rather than in rural ones, confirming the idea that MOOCs were not disproportionately serving those who are geographically isolated.

They also found that students who either had parents with a bachelor’s degree or already had a post-secondary education were more likely to complete the courses.

As the authors of this study put it, “Our research on MOOCs – along with previous decades’ research examining the access and usage patterns of emerging learning technologies – should provoke skepticism of lofty claims regarding democratization, level playing fields, and closing gaps that might accompany new genres of online learning, especially those targeted at younger learners. Freely available learning technologies can offer broad social benefits, but educators and policymakers should not assume that the underserved or disadvantaged will be the chief beneficiaries.”

Hopefully the results of this study, together with others that have been publicized, will open the eyes of those with a blind faith in a “technological fix” for some of our problems in higher education. This information should also serve as a warning to those

administrators, particularly those at institutions serving largely rural, low-income populations, that these approaches are not a valid alternative to quality education for the underprivileged.

Add to that the results of other studies mentioned in this column in the past that show that the proportion of students finishing these courses is extremely low, an important factor these days when politicians and publications that rank colleges are putting more emphasis on completion rates in assessing a school’s effectiveness.

Finally, those for us who deal with the day-to-day task of teaching college students need to remind the general population what these students are saying in the classroom to us. They know that there is not a technological substitute for a face-to-face education experience with good teachers in the classroom, the lab and the studio.

These and other data should also be illuminating to those who believe that you can offer cheap (even free) higher education as a way to democratize its access. Quite the contrary, MOOCs seem to increase the social and economic divide between the haves and the have-nots. The problem is that solid data do not always change the minds of desperate administrators dealing with decreasing budget support from their states or politicians who use demagoguery and dismissive assertions against higher education.

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